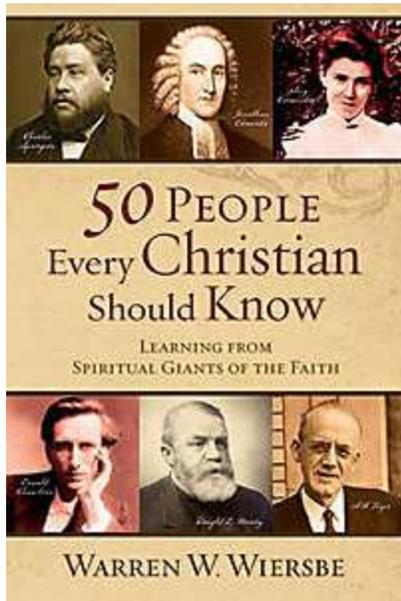


## Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

September 14 2014: 50 People Not Every Christian Should Know



I forget where I encountered the ad for this book - either a radio show or a recommendation on some internet newsletter - but my first reaction was, "I would like to read biographical sketches of Christians who have influenced the development of the church." My second reaction was similar: "I'll bet my children would read biographies of significant Christian historical figures - get them to read something besides the light historical romance fictions they seem addicted to." And, rather than merely order it on-line, I supported the business of the local Christian bookstore, and had them order [50 People Every Christian Should Know \[1\]](#) for me. A week later, it arrived and I picked it up. And started reading it. And was disappointed.

The title is misleading. It should really be *46 Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Preachers Every Preacher Should Know and Four Random Women Thrown In To Round Out the Count*. Katherine Von Bora (Luther's Wife), Amy Carmichael (a representative female foreign missionary - Southern Baptists would be more familiar with Lottie Moon), and blind hymnwriters Fanny Crosby and Frances Havergal were not preachers or professional ministers, but pretty much every other biography in the book was of a preacher, from the Victorian Age to the Mid-Twentieth Century, from England and Scotland and Wales and the United States. Some of the names will be recognizable to most contemporary Christian readers - Dwight L. Moody, Charles Spurgeon, and Jonathan Edwards, to name a few, but most are obscure preachers - I never heard of the likes of R.W. Dale or Samuel Chadwick. I am not quite sure why the author thinks that every Christian should know about men like these.

The author, Warren Wiersbe, is himself a pastor, and the book is a collection of biographical sketches he produced as a series for a magazine or a radio show. It is possible that the original articles were targeted at preachers, since in nearly all cases, Wiersbe does a bit of a

survey of the subject's writings and key literary contributions, and makes recommendations for books to obtain for the reader's library. But why would anyone but preachers want collections of other preachers' sermons? It made the book fairly fast reading, since I could get to the end of the biographical part, and just skim through the recommendations of books to obtain for one's library, and then pick up the closing remarks at the end of the chapter.

Now, these recommendations were not entirely without merit for the typical "lay" reader, as in a few cases he makes note of devotional books that the subject preacher had produced. Wiersbe notes, and I agree, that the devotional writings of today are puerile things, with perhaps a single Bible verse followed by a few paragraphs of sentimental fluff, whereas the corresponding writings of the last century were full of Scripture and meaty, challenging reflections. I have Spurgeon's Evening and Morning series, and they are quite good. All the same, I will stand by what I say here, that these articles are really for the use of preachers and pastors; if a pastor reviews a recommended devotional work from one or two hundred years ago and believes it would be useful for those in his congregation, he ought to recommend it to his congregation himself, and perhaps even make copies available, maybe even follow up and discover who is actually using it. This is a rare thing. I have been in churches where some devotional booklet was available on a table in the foyer or a hall, usually the typical fluffy stuff produced today, but the pastor or anybody else doesn't push it or even mention it. The closest I ever got was a pastor who, after discovering I was a computer jockey, handed me a floppy of Oswald Chambers writings. I would have thought that a pastor ought to be concerned about the spiritual development of their charges, in what they do and read (and watch and listen to) during their daily lives. Apparently not; other than an occasional nod and passing suggestion, the idea that church members should be doing any sort of personal devotion or study is absent from the pastor's concern.

Indeed, while there was one or two individuals in the book whom Wiersbe found notable for the intensity of their pastoral focus rather than their abilities in the pulpit, he clearly finds powerful speakers more interesting. I am left suspecting that this is a phenomenon of the professional admiring other professionals. As an engineer, I am aware of notable engineers, scientists, and inventors of the past (such as Nikola Tesla, Charles Steinmetz, Michael Faraday, or even Steve Wozniak of Apple and Jack Kilby of Texas Instruments); I read books about them, I read what they had to say themselves. So I should not really be surprised that a preacher admires other preachers.

What is disturbing to me, however, is that the preacher thinks that *other Christians* **should** admire old preachers. I think it is important for Christians generally to know who Dwight Moody and Charles Spurgeon

and Jonathan Edwards were, but I do not believe it is important for us to know about three dozen otherwise obscure men whose claim to eternal fame is that they could deliver a good sermon and on that basis attract a large congregation. The notion that "preaching" sermons is of paramount importance for a church's pastor is alarming to me, and Wiersbe apparently believes that contemporary preachers should equip themselves with the thoughts and styles and outlines of the last century's great preachers, apparently with the hope of reproducing their successes. I am aware that men "called to the ministry" attend theological seminaries, where a major part of their education is dedicated to preparing sermons, delivering sermons, and generally the overriding importance of the Sunday morning sermon. I can't help but wonder if this is a self-affirming mechanism for cultural conservatism - the elders teaching the time-honored values to the young, who then in turn become the elders teaching the next generation.

I also can't help but wonder if preachers like Wiersbe ever stop their adulation of the art of sermonizing to look about them at the present culture. Perhaps in the day of Spurgeon and Moody, with the Christian consensus still firmly in place, the preaching of stirring sermons *could* affect the man in the street. It is increasingly obvious that a post-Christian climate is developing in the West. That man in the street has little regard for what Christians do in their services. Maybe there is still a place for sermons in the church in the Western world, but it is hard for me to believe that it is still as significant as preachers like Warren Wiersbe and all the pastors of all the churches I've ever been in are obviously convinced that it is.

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1. [www.lifeway.com/Product/50-people-every-christian-should-know-P005180078](http://www.lifeway.com/Product/50-people-every-christian-should-know-P005180078)